A Hidden Agenda

The hidden agenda of every spiritually abusive group is always the same: the glorification of the leadership. The leadership will invariably deny this. They will always point to God's will, or God's glory, or God's word, or the needs of God's people, or some other lofty, spiritual goal as being the true object of their "ministry."

Because these noble ideals are not the true goals of the spiritually abusive group, inconsistency and hypocrisy abounds within it. And because this is the case, information control becomes necessary. The group is governed by unspoken rules -- hidden "landmines" which unfortunate newcomers and long-standing members alike occasionally stumble upon, thus incurring the wrath of the leadership. The common feature of all these "landmines" is that they protect the leader from careful scrutiny.

In our group, one landmine was something called "rescuing behavior." If the leader was attacking or accusing a member of the group, and someone stepped up to defend that person, he was labeled a "rescuer." A "rescuer" was someone who protected other people who were guilty of the same sins that he or she was guilty of.

So let's say that you witnessed an event in which the leader started verbally assaulting someone for something which did not appear to be a sin. If you stepped in and defended that person, he was labeled a "rescuer." You might respond, "I don't see how I'm guilty of that, any more than that person is!" "I know," the leader would answer, "I expect someone as spiritually immature as you are to be blind to his own sin." And all the other group members would nod knowingly in agreement. This "landmine" prevents members from defending others because to do so means coming under automatic suspicion. The accused are guilty, and anyone who tries to defend their innocence are also guilty.

When current or former members try to call the leadership into account, it is labeled "slander," or "an attack." Information that would prove damaging to the leader is only allowed to be aired in a setting that is controlled by the leader, who will usually quote Scripture verses and cite "Biblical principles" to justify his control.
The most powerful of all unspoken rules in the abusive system is what we have already termed the "can't-talk" rule. The "can't-talk" has this thinking behind it: "The real problem cannot be exposed because then it would have to be dealt with and things would have to change; so it must be protected behind walls of silence (neglect) or by assault (legalistic attack). If you speak about the problem out loud, you are the problem. Those people who do speak out are most often told, "We didn't have all these problems until you started shooting your mouth off. Everything was fine before you started stirring things up." Or else, to make it sound really spiritual, "You were angry--you didn't confront the matter in a 'loving' way. So it proves you weren't handling the matter in a mature, Christian manner."... The "can't-talk" rule ... blames the person who talks, and the ensuing punishments pressure questioners into silence.

[David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse, p. 68.]

Little did I know that our group had one "can't talk" rule from the very beginning. When people left the group, the first thing the leader did was call them on the phone and tell them not to communicate with any of the remaining group members. I learned about this after I had been in the group for a few years, and it was confirmed to me by people who left very early during my involvement. But one "can't talk" rule tends to breed more, and eventually we had "can't talk" rules that covered a variety of both general and special situation. For example: during my final year in the group, the leader prohibited my wife and I from having any serious discussions outside of the group meetings. We could discuss the weather, the groceries, and so on, but nothing deeper.

Groups that are run by hidden agendas are invariably dependent on information control, because you can't keep the true agenda hidden unless you control what the members know. Depending upon the nature of the leader's agenda, this control can extend to all sorts of reading material, television, and communication with family and friends.

The leader will claim that group members are totally free to read or think what they want, and this is true -- as long as they do not wish to remain members, and do not mind losing their friends in the group. Being caught with the "wrong" material will, at the very minimum, arouse suspicion and possible accusation against the "guilty" member's motives. Sometimes members are forbidden to read certain newspaper articles, or are told not to read or listen to any of the news media. Books on Spiritual Abuse are almost always off-limits. The leader of my group was enraged to learn that I had read Churches That Abuse, by Ronald Enroth. He admitted that he, himself, had never read it, had only read reviews of it, but he nevertheless labeled it "a dangerous book." He even freely admitted that our group practiced the things that Enroth described. Did he think that by somehow hiding the fact that outsiders considered his practices to be abusive we would never catch on? It would seem so.

But one way or another, the true nature of the group, and the true agenda of the leader eventually becomes obvious to any outsider, or any insider who is willing to see it.

It becomes obvious in the way the leadership is made the center of attention. Many spiritual abusers are too clever to allow their followers to praise them to their faces. That would make the cult-like nature of the group (which is at the very minimum a personality cult centered around the leader) obvious to all. Sometimes the leader may even issue a showy rebuke to a member who adores him too openly. An astute spiritual abuser instead prefers to be content in the knowledge that while he is present, he is in
charge of what happens in the group, and when he is absent, the group pays verbal homage to him by quoting his pearls of wisdom and by asking themselves the question, "What would our leader say or do if he were here?"

It also becomes obvious in the way that the failures of the leader are inevitably blamed on someone else. When people are crushed by the Spiritual Abuse, it is blamed on them. "If you were not so spiritually immature, I would not have to treat you this way," he might say. Or if the leader is truly expert at manipulation, he can train others to defend him without even having to remind them. If the leader commits a particularly atrocious outburst, someone might say, "He was right to lose his temper at you!" or, "I used to get angry at him when he did that to me, but then I realized he was right." Others in the group often nod in agreement. Few people can stand when a whole group of people is arrayed against them.

When the leader fails to fulfill some promise, he can always say, "I would have done what I said, but then God showed me that you were not ready for it. So now I can't." It always helps the spiritual abuser's case if he can blame God for his own failure. After all, who is going to question the Almighty?

The true agenda further becomes obvious in the way that the leader handles undeniable failures -- i.e., failures that he can't pawn off on someone else. Even if he is caught in the act of some sin that disqualifies him from the ministry, he will cling tenaciously to their position of "authority," as if he was the only person that God could use to accomplish His purpose ... or as if he is exempt from the penalties he himself may have pronounced upon others. When he is caught, he will sometimes tell his followers to ignore the evidence. It is amazing how many will! But even if he admits that he is guilty of sins far greater than what he may have condemned others for (and such admissions, though rare, do happen), he will always find some loophole that keeps him in control. He will present the case for retaining his position in compelling tones, or with dire warnings, or with feigned mourning, as he strives to retain his hold over as many people as possible.

But if God's will, or God's glory, or God's word, or any other high calling was the real purpose then the leadership would be more than willing to relinquish his or her supposed "authority." In fact, if it was God's interests, rather than his own, that he was promoting, he would have followed Christ's example by doing whatever was necessary to humble himself a long time ago.

**Philippians 2:14-15**, "Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe ..." (NIV)

**Colossians 4:6**, "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." (NIV)